**Season of political challenges**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-03-08

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan was compelled to seek a vote of confidence from the National Assembly following the defeat of his finance minister in the Senate election. He has now secured this and demonstrated that he still commands a majority. But this should be a moment of humility and introspection, and not triumphalism. More so because other challenges lie ahead when the political aftershocks of the Senate election, which exposed his government`s fragility, are unlikely to quickly fade away. Therefore, the government needs to reflect on what happened and learn lessons from a bruising experience that forced a trust vote on it.  
  
The defeat of the ruling party candidate, Hafeez Sheikh, at the hands of the opposition nominee, Yousuf Raza Gilani, represented one of the biggest upsets in the Senate`s recent election history.  
  
Because it became such a high-stake poll, as the entire membership of the National Assembly constitutes the electoral college for Islamabad`s seat, its political impact was that much greater. It left the government reeling from the biggest political setback faced in its tenure. The PTI government was also unable, despite winning more seats, to secure control of the Senate. It has 47 seats along with its coalition partners while PDM and allies have 53.  
  
The prime minister sought to blunt the opposition`s demand for a confidence vote in the Assembly by pre-emptively seeking one himself. He secured 178 votes in the open ballot. But here is the paradox. Rather than end political uncertainty and ensure stability this may open the door to more opposition moves in a complex politic al chess game.  
  
The chink in the ruling party`s armour laid bare in the Senate election has emboldened the opposition and encouraged it to mount more pressure and plan further moves.  
  
The opposition could now shift the battlefield to Punjab after the prime minister`s successful confidence vote which shrinks the political space for a no-trust motion in the near term. An opposition leader has already hinted at this. The opposition knows that an uninspiring and unpopular leadership in Punjab has made the province PT I`s Achilles heel. The government`s majority is razor thin in theprovincial assembly with its survival resting on support from PML-Q, whose leaders have long felt undervalued by the prime minister and could prove to be a wild card in any fluid political situation.  
  
Meanwhile, the prime minister`s speech after the Senate election reflected the angst of a leader frustratedbywhathadhappened andwhoascribed the setback to the opposition`s `corrupt practices`.  
  
The sermonising tone was familiar and repeated in his address to the National Assembly af ter the trust vote. His gratuitous criticism of the Election Commission for holding the Senate election by secret ballot provoked an unusually sharp rebuke from the ECP. Yet he echoed the critique in parliament. There was no indication of lessons learnt or any dispassionate assessment of the Senate setback, which is needed in view of the impending election of the Senate chairman.  
  
Fielding Sheikh on a general seat from the capital was not a well-thought decision. As a technocrat he faced a tougher contest when the combined opposition nominated a long-time politician as their candidate. Sheikh had few if any links with Assembly members while Gilani had worked closely with parliamentarians during many decades in politics and as prime minister. Resentment against technocrats being awarded parliamentary seats has long been voiced in PTI. This was to prove consequential.  
  
The government did however sense its candidate`s vulnerability and thus made last-minute efforts to secure an open Senate ballot in the hope of forestalling lawmakers from switching sides. All its manoeuvres were however frustrated the abortive constitution amendment bill, an ordinance and then the Supreme Court`s advisory opinion upholding the secret ballot as enjoined by the Constitution.  
  
Gilani`s victory showed that the government got 11 votes fewer than its parliamentary support while the opposition candidate got five more votes than PDM`s combined National Assembly strength.  
  
This meant that members from PTI`s allied parties switched sides and several PTI backbenchers also defied the party line. This was acknowledged by the prime minister himself who later claimed 16PTI members had `sold out`.  
  
It was hardly a surprise. There were signs aplenty of discontent within PTI ranks and among the ruling party`s allies. The chickens had come home to roost for a party leadership that consistently failed to respond to its allies` concerns and barely found time to address the sources of disgruntlement within PTI. The leader of the House, for example, rarely came to the Assembly.  
  
Although the government will now bask in the success of the confidence vote it would be mistaken to think that its political problems are over. Its experience in the Senate election and earlier in byelections should be a sobering wake-up call for the leadership and should prompt a rethink of its political management. Legislation will be challenging to steer through parliament as the combined opposition is numerically stronger in the Senate. That should be reason enough for it to abandon its unilateral ways and reach out to work with lawmakers both in and beyond its party.  
  
There are other lessons for the government from the Senate setback, which also showed the limits of the establishment`s influence. An important lesson is that political management cannot be left to the establishment. The PTI leadership should focus on addressing its political management deficit and cultivate the habit of listening to its backbenchers and be responsive to allies. Being a coalition government, this should be a matter of priority not choice. It has already seen how losing a few parliamentary votes can yield a negative outcome. With the prime minister generally inaccessible there is no focal person in PTI to whom backbenchers can turn to have their problems addressed.  
  
In parliamentary politics nothing can ever be taken for granted. The election of the Senate chairman and deputy chairmen is the next political test that looms for the government. But its toughest and most consequential test could come in the Punjab Assembly if the opposition decides to move a noconfidence motion there. That could yet be a game changer. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.